

# Fort Davis

National Historic Site

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Curriculum Materials Grades 9-12

Student Activity: The “Indian Problem” in 1881



~ Indian Policy Reform ~  
**Extract from President Chester Arthur's  
First Annual Message to Congress**

**December 6, 1881**

(James D. Richardson, ed. *Messages and Papers*, Vol. VIII, p. 54 ff.)

“ . . . Prominent among the matters which challenge the attention of Congress at its present session is the management of our Indian affairs. While this question has been a cause of trouble and embarrassment from the infancy of the Government, it is but recently that any effort has been made for its solution at once serious, determined, consistent, and promising success.

It has been easier to resort to convenient makeshifts for tiding over temporary difficulties than to grapple with the great permanent problem, and accordingly the easier course has almost invariably been pursued.

It was natural, at a time when the national territory seemed almost illimitable and contained many millions of acres far outside the bounds of civilized settlements, that a policy should have been initiated which more than aught else has been the fruitful source of our Indian complications.

I refer, of course, to the policy of dealing with the various Indian tribes as separate nationalities, of relegating them by treaty stipulations to the occupancy of immense reservations in the West, and of encouraging them to live a savage life, undisturbed by any earnest and well-directed efforts to bring them under the influences of civilization.



The unsatisfactory results which have sprung from this policy are becoming apparent to all.

As the white settlements have crowded the borders of the reservations, the Indians, sometimes contentedly and sometimes against their will, have been transferred to other hunting grounds, from which they have again been dislodged whenever their new-found homes have been desired by the adventurous settlers.

These removals and the frontier collisions by which they have often been preceded have led to frequent and disastrous conflicts between the races.

It is profitless to discuss here which of them has been chiefly responsible for the disturbances whose recital occupies so large a space upon the pages of our history.

We have to deal with the appalling fact that though thousands of lives have been sacrificed and hundreds of millions of dollars expended in the attempt to solve the Indian problem, it has until within the past few years seemed scarcely nearer a solution than it was half a century ago. But the Government has of

late been cautiously but steadily feeling its way to the adoption of a policy which has already produced gratifying results, and which, in my judgment, is likely, if Congress and the Executive accord in its support, to relieve us ere long from the difficulties which have hitherto beset us.

For the success of the efforts now making to introduce among the Indians the customs and pursuits of civilized life and gradually to absorb them into the mass of our citizens, sharing their rights and holden to their responsibilities, there is imperative need for legislative action.

My suggestions in that regard will be chiefly such as have been already called to the attention of Congress and have received to some extent its consideration.



First. I recommend the passage of an act making the laws of the various States and Territories applicable to the Indian ....



The Indian should receive the protection of the law. He should be allowed to maintain in court his rights of person and property. He has repeatedly begged for this privilege. Its exercise would be very valuable to him in his progress toward civilization.

Second. Of even greater importance is a measure which has been frequently recommended by my predecessors in office, and in furtherance of which several bills have been from time to time introduced in both Houses of Congress. The enactment of a general law permitting the allotment in severalty, to such Indians, at least, as desire it, of a reasonable quantity of land secured to them by patent, and for their own protection made inalienable for twenty or twenty-five years, is demanded for their present welfare and their permanent advancement.

In return for such considerate action on the part of the Government, there is reason to believe that the Indians in large numbers would be persuaded to sever their tribal

relations and to engage at once in agricultural pursuits. Many of them realize the fact that their hunting days are over and that it is now for their best interests to conform their manner of life to the new order of things. By no greater inducement than the assurance of permanent title to the soil can they be led to engage in the occupation of tilling it.

The well-attested reports of their increasing interest in husbandry justify the hope and belief that the enactment of such a statute as I recommend would be at once attended with gratifying results. A resort to the allotment system would have a direct and powerful influence in dissolving the tribal bond, which is so prominent a feature of savage life, and which tends so strongly to perpetuate it.

Third. I advise a liberal appropriation for the support of Indian schools, because of my confident belief that such a course is consistent with the wisest economy. . . .

We have to deal with the appalling fact that though thousands of lives have been sacrificed and hundreds of millions of dollars expended in the attempt to solve the Indian problem, it has until within the past few years seemed scarcely nearer a solution than it was half a century ago....”





Student \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Reading Guide: *Chester Arthur's First Annual Message to Congress in 1881*

Answer questions 2-8 in complete sentences and supported with quotes from *President Chester Arthur's First Annual Message to Congress* and from research. [Photo credits: Library of Congress and Edward S. Curtis/Northwestern University Library]

1. Vocabulary words to define: absorb, holden, imperative, persuaded, agricultural
2. What "rights" did Chester Arthur, President from September of 1881 to March of 1885, think Indians [sometimes known as Native Americans, First Americans, or American Indians] should be given?
3. What was the "Indian problem" or the "great permanent problem" that the President references, and what was his overall goal for solving the problem?
4. What do you think was missing from President Arthur's address?
5. Chester Arthur said: "Many of them [Indians] realize the fact that their hunting days are over and that it is now for their best interests to conform their manner of life to the new order of things." What do you think this quote meant?
6. Can you think of any presidential or government policies in recent times that are in any way similar to this document?
7. Were the President's recommendations acted on by the U.S. Congress?
8. The last graphic is a painting by John Gast, circa 1872, entitled *American Progress*. Do some research and then write a short descriptive analysis of what the painting represented and the meaning of the term "Manifest Destiny." When was the term "Manifest Destiny" first used? Relate this painting to what was happening in America in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.